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Angela Ginorio: Building bridges between feminism and science [1]

Submitted by Mónica Ivelisse Feliú-Mójer [2] on 2 February 2015 - 1:39am

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Dr. Angela Ginorio (right) with her PhD student Noralis Rodríguez Coss (Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington).

During the last century, women have experienced great progress in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields [4]. However, we still face barriers [5] that contribute to our underrepresentation in these disciplines.

Dr. Angela Ginorio [6] is a Borinqueña that has dedicated her career to understanding and mitigating the barriers that contribute to the low representation of women and ethnic minorities in STEM. This professor, (now emeritus) at the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington (UW), is a pioneer in the field of feminist science studies.

Ginorio was born in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico and raised in a humble household in the Saint Just neighborhood of Trujillo Alto. She has a bachelor's and a master's degree in psychology from the

University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras (UPR-RP). In fact, she was a member of the first group to receive a master's degree in psychology from the UPR-RP.

After teaching for a short time at her alma mater, it was clear to Angela that if she wanted to continue to advance professionally, she had to pursue a PhD. Since at the time there were no institutions in Puerto Rico that offered a PhD in psychology, "I had to leave," she recalled.

The birth of a lifelong passion

What inspired Angela to pursue issues of race and gender as areas of study? It was a mix of personal and academic experiences.

"I was a feminist [7] before knowing what that meant. Back then (when she lived in Puerto Rico), feminism was something under the table," she said.

On the other hand, her interest in racial issues started at a young age and intensified during her college years. "My father's grandmother was born a slave. We didn't talk about it much, but it was a known fact and that seemed very interesting to me," she recalled.

"In college, I took a class in which I did a project on the social distance between Puerto Ricans and other individuals from the Caribbean. During my master's degree, I had a professor who encouraged us to ask racially-focused questions," she added.

For her master's thesis, Angela investigated the perceptions of gender and race among Puerto Ricans. For her PhD in cross-cultural psychology [8] at Fordham University in New York City, she expanded on this topic. Her doctoral thesis compared gender and race perceptions among Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and the United States with perceptions of gender and race of whites and blacks in the U.S. At that time (1970s) the field of cross-cultural psychology was emerging and Angela had the privilege of being one of 20 students to participate in special training in that area of study.

From Fordham, she went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, to work with Dr. Harry Triandis [9], a leader in cross-cultural psychology. There she became very interested in the status of women in academia. With a colleague, she decided to compare the levels of representation of women in various disciplines. They found that most fields with low representation of women were in STEM.

Once at UW, Angela worked as a counselor for female, minority and underrepresented students. Eventually, she was named director of the Northwest Center for Research on Women and the UW Women's Information Center. From these positions, she was able to appreciate from another perspective the difficulties faced by these students.

Angela led discussions with female and underrepresented students and scientists on the challenges they faced and what motivated them to persist. Of all the factors identified, one stood out: many of the students and scientists were from rural areas and attributed being their persistence in science to that factor.

This would inspire Angela to create the Rural Girls in Science [10] program, to expose students from rural areas who would otherwise not have the opportunity to science.

"The program included a two-week science summer camp for ninth grade girls, their teachers, counselors and school principal. The girls had to complete a one-year project that used science to solve a problem in their community. Finally, we had an annual summit where the girls presented the results of their projects to a wide audience," she said.

"Rural Girls in Science was a wonderful and very intense project," Angela added.

Nearly 100 girls, mostly Latina and Native American, participated of Rural Girls in Science during its 12-year duration. Indicative of the impact of the project, from the first three cohorts, 82% of girls attended college, and half of them majored in STEM disciplines.

"With this project we learned the importance of involving the community to promote the interest and success of these girls in STEM. Rural Girls in Science made these girls visible; they became community ambassadors. It gave them confidence in themselves and helped them develop as leaders," she mentioned.

Building bridges, closing gaps

Throughout her career, and from her perspective as a feminist social scientist, Angela has advocated for creating and strengthening interdisciplinary ties between social sciences and STEM disciplines to address the challenges faced by women in science.

"[Thirty years ago] there was a cultural gap between feminism and science. Feminist scientists (in STEM) didn't have the research tools of social sciences and social scientists did not have the perspective of being a woman in science."

Angela was one of the first researchers to integrate both perspectives and a pioneer in the area of feminist science studies. "When I started, most women in the field were scientists. I was one of the first feminist social scientists to focus on these issues [of women in science]. "

Aware that female scientists and feminists had different and important perspectives to contribute to the conversation, Angela led and continues to lead several efforts to close the gap. For example, with her colleague Marjorie Olmstead [11] in the Department of Physics at UW, she created one of the first courses [12] in the United States to be cross-listed by a physics and a social sciences department. Angela has also authored several influential publications [13] on the subject of women in science.

Asked about how the situation has improved, Angela said, "at least, now people recognize what feminist science studies are. [Now], the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) has a task force on science and technology. Most scientific associations have committees focused on women's issues. There is progress to be made in both fronts (social sciences and STEM), but [at least] there is progress."

Throughout her career Ginorio has been the living example of one of her favorite quotes "Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar (Wayfarer, there is no way, make your way

by going farther [14]).” Angela has helped carve the path of progress for future generations of female and underrepresented scientists and her work has made science more inclusive.

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